

# Library work in the Solomon Islands

— Sally Edridge, Lecturer, New Zealand Library School and formerly Library Adviser to the Solomon Islands

*This is the first of a series of articles on librarianship overseas.*

Lying north of the New Hebrides and east of New Guinea, the Solomon Islands reach over 1,000 miles of ocean, with a total land area of 11,500 square miles comprising many hundreds of islands ranging from tiny atolls to mountainous land masses. Coral reefs and lagoons surround the islands and the equatorial climate, where time is marked by the dry and wet seasons and the temperatures remain warm and humid, has covered the land with dense rain forests broken along the coast by patches of vegetation. Tropical fruits and vegetables are prolific and the seas are plentifully supplied with fish and turtles. Animals are few and closely allied to the ancient custom-life of the people. Lizards, turtles, dolphins, crocodiles, and sharks are common, pigs and dogs having been introduced before recorded time. Rats, cats and other animals arrived with traders and missionaries. Birds and insects abound, including the malarial mosquito.

Recorded time began with the arrival of the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana in 1568, but the Solomon Islands had little contact with the world until the arrival of traders and missionaries in the late 1800s. In 1893 they were declared a British protectorate. The colonial administration combined with missionary endeavour to bring social and economic development to a country reputed to be one of the most dangerous places in the Pacific. History however continued to be one of conflict. Ancient custom had developed practices of savage massacres and head-hunting and the disruption of traditional beliefs and the introduction of new social and physical diseases helped to continue conflict between the people themselves and those endeavouring to convert them and bring progress.

As far as the world was concerned the Solomon Islands remained forgotten until World War II focused attention on the battle of Guadalcanal and the defeat of the Japanese by American forces in the Pacific. During this time the administration





was withdrawn, in essence failing the people in their hour of need, and the American troops came as their saviours. With the return of British administration the reaction against colonial rule brought moves to return to traditional lore and custom and the immediate post-war years continued a history of conflict. Relentlessly, however, the bureaucratic wheels have been grinding on and education, health services, agricultural, commercial and industrial development will culminate in independence for the Solomon Islands in 1978. It was in the final stages of pre-independence development planning that a policy of cultural development was considered. Assistance, in the form of personnel, was sought to establish a national museum and a national library system. New Zealand offered such assistance in the form of a library adviser under the Bilateral Aid Scheme.

In early April 1974 therefore I was to be flying over the coastline of Guadalcanal where the remnants of battle are still lying clearly outlined in the water, to land on the historical Henderson airfield. As the plane dropped, leaf houses could be seen grouped in little pockets on the hillsides. In similar small villages nine-tenths of Solomon Islanders still maintain their traditional life: family groups on their tribal lands growing their own food and cooking in a pit or in a billy over a fire. Clothing is minimal, often merely a piece of coloured calico wound round the waist. Except for the occasional transistor radio there is very little other evidence of European influence. The climate, a history of endless battle against malaria, and the plentiful supply of food have all contributed to an effortless life style. Out of this has developed skill in craftsmanship and woodcarving, providing a major contribution to the artistic wealth of Oceania and more recently a valuable income for those able to sell to tourists.

The capital of Honiara presents dramatic contrast. Here there is a population of about 15,000, including more than 1,000 expatriates. The commercial sector is dominated by the Chinese. Most shops sell everything, pots and pans, bread and butter, wine and spirits, with a few being the agents for imported European cars, mini-moke to Mercedes. Along the road are the offices of government while the surrounding ridges are populated by the urban residents. Cinema, yacht club, tennis courts, swimming pools all add to the trappings of a typical small city. A city with a difference though as coconut palms, flame trees and frangipani line the streets and shoreline and

palms stretch as far as the eye can see. One long hot summer reigns and the population wear the lightest of clothes. During the week all are working long morning hours and returning to a lethargic afternoon which finishes at four o'clock. The expatriate fights a constant battle living and working here, often at the price of physical and sometimes mental health.

This sector of the population changes all the time as people retreat home to recover from the rigours of the climate and are replaced by new recruits or those strengthened by the several months of leave essential after 18-24 months. Many Solomon Islanders, too, return to their villages after working for a period, either rejecting the Western way of life, or having acquired enough money to buy a few essentials. Thus the localisation of posts presents the administration with major problems and a significant proportion of trained Solomon Islanders scarcely practise their profession before going back to their families and a subsistence way of life.

Honiara apart, education, local government, central government and its inevitable red tape all seem unnecessary in this last remaining island paradise. How relevant can these be when to be rural is to be illiterate, and to eat you can climb for a coconut, knock down a paw paw, or fish from the drifting canoe? Although education has been available at the primary level officially since 1957 those who have overcome the difficulties of walking many miles daily and of paying tuition fees often receive little formal instruction and this, initially, is in one of the 87 different vernaculars. Reading is taught in English, but with lengthy periods of absence during the four years when education is available to all a low level of attainment is reached by the majority. At regular intervals during the schooling of a child a certain percentage of pupils are selected to continue and the remainder return to their villages to help mind the children while the adults gather the food from the gardens. Denied access to books, they quickly lose any ability they had to read and the literacy level in the Solomon Islands could not be more than 5-10 percent. Nevertheless I had no choice but to add yet another dimension to this administrative empire of Honiara.

The terms of reference provided that the library system evolved should be available to all and that it should cost as little as possible. In June of 1974 therefore the Solomon Islands National Library was established and in the same year the following



aims were accepted as Government policy.

- 1 To provide opportunities for all Solomon Islanders to have access to reading material for the purpose of individual development and recreation.
- 2 To co-ordinate under the National Library service the professional procedures for libraries which are members of the service in the Solomon Islands and to assist in the establishment of new libraries.
- 3 To provide library extension services throughout the Solomon Islands.
- 4 To provide training and advice to all people engaged in library work that they in turn may advise the borrowers on techniques of library usage.
- 5 To establish a national union catalogue of the holdings of the Solomon Islands.
- 6 To collect and record material related to the Solomon Islands produced both within the Solomon Islands and overseas.

At that time, libraries existing in the islands included collections in the six secondary schools, two Bible colleges, the Teachers' College, the Technical Institute and the Honiara Public Library. Of these only the 12,000 books in the Public Library had been catalogued. This library was in the hands of a partially trained library assistant and two helpers. Most of the stock had been donated by well-meaning charitable bodies from overseas and as such could be regarded as relevant to the expatriate population only. \$500 per year had been available for the purchase of new books. It was not surprising that expatriate and indigenous population alike felt that Solomon Islanders were not interested in reading.

The National Library service was envisaged as a centralised service engaged in acquisition and cataloguing for all member libraries. Library staff would be trained according to the manpower training policy and they would be responsible for overseeing the duties of all staff throughout the service. Member libraries would receive book grants to establish adequate resources and these would be supplemented by loan collections from the central National Library stock which would be shelved in the Honiara Public Library allowing for maximum use of minimum resources. All member libraries would be expected to acquire their own stock annually.

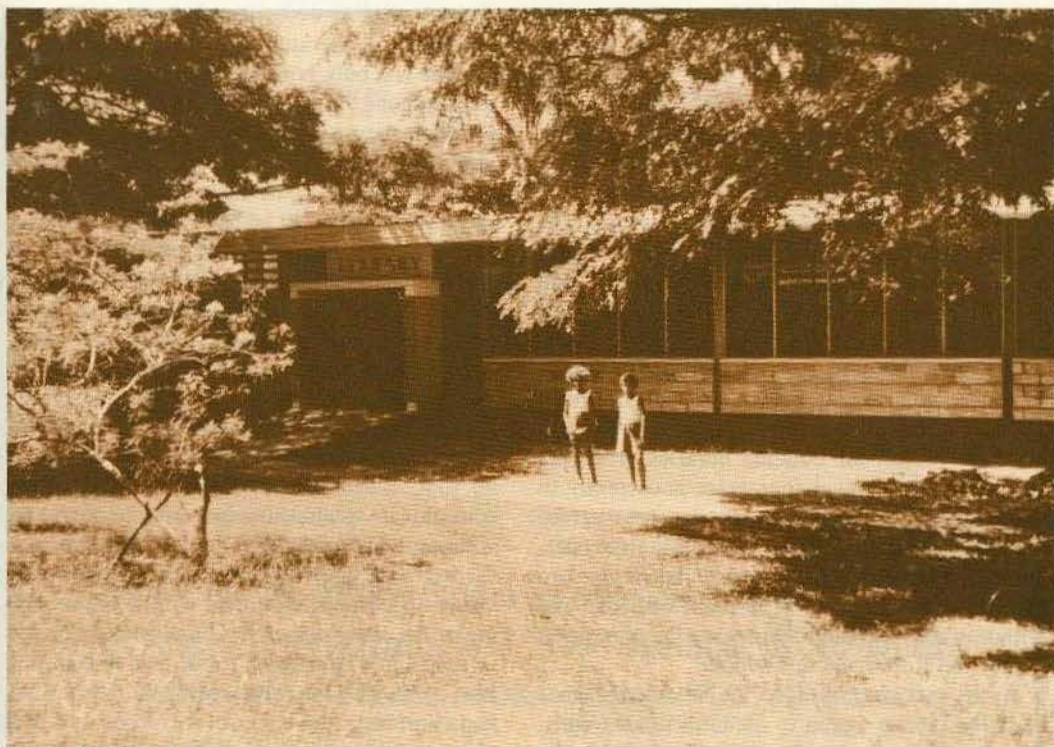
Over the next three years four permanent staffing positions and two temporary posts were established. The permanent posts were those of

National Librarian, Deputy National Librarian, library assistant, and typist/clerk. Subsequently, staff received training according to the requirements of the job. The National Librarian designate came to New Zealand for a period of attachment to libraries prior to participating in the 1977 Diploma course. The Deputy National Librarian is spending two years in Papua New Guinea working towards a professional library qualification at the Library School. The library assistant undertook the 1976 Fiji Library Certificate Course. The temporary posts of library adviser and assistant librarian were established for a period of six years from 1974 to 1979. The establishment and development of the service has been the responsibility of the library adviser, provided under the New Zealand Bilateral Aid Scheme for three years and by the British Council for a further three. The additional assistance was given by an experienced expatriate for two years and from 1975 to 1979 is being provided under the VSO scheme through Great Britain. Further posts should be established as the service develops.

During the first three years (1974-1976), the Solomon Islands National Library classified, catalogued, and recorded in the national union

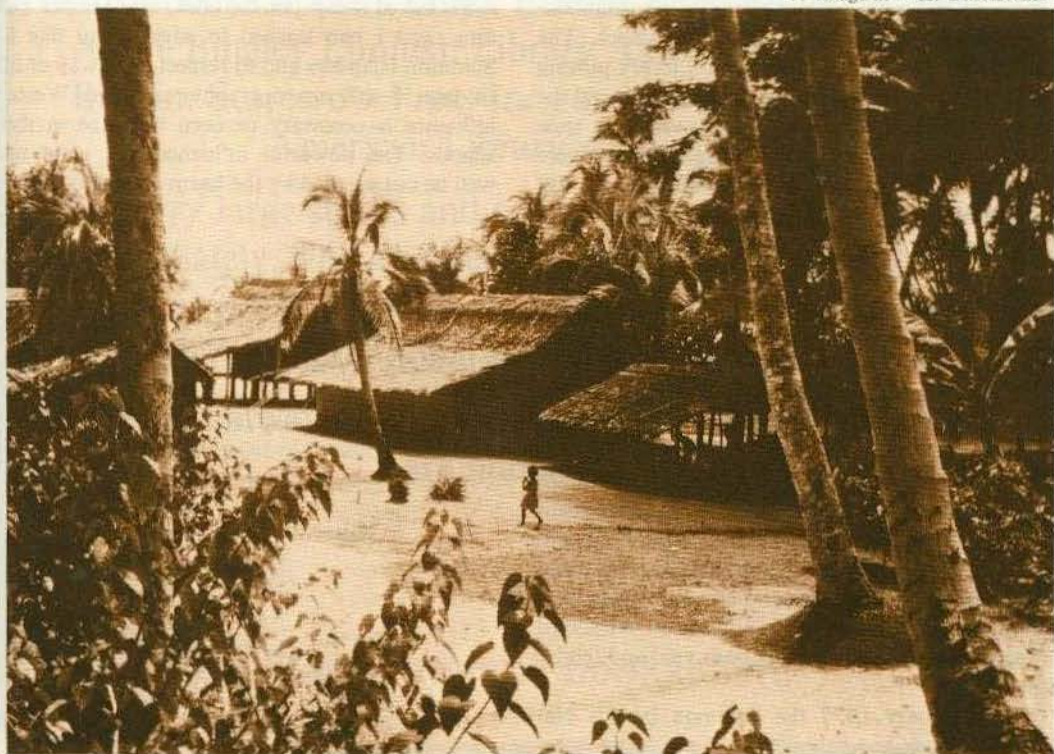






Honiara Public Library.

A village in West Guadalcanal.





catalogue the bookstocks of 17 libraries including those in schools, tertiary institutions and government departments. A total of 54,662 books passed through our hands. In addition an acquisition programme was developed, the primary source being British Council aid with additional grants from New Zealand and Australia. British Council aid has been approved through two programmes. The Book Presentation Programme will provide a total of £23,000 worth of stock for educational and special libraries between 1976 and 1980. The Library Development Scheme allows for the sum of £33,000 for stock and £7,250 for equipment for the National Library and the establishment of libraries in the district centres between 1975 and 1980. A project for building libraries in district centres phased in over four years is currently in operation and councils in the districts have agreed to maintain the buildings, and release staff to operate the libraries. Councils will be encouraged to allocate annual grants for purchase of books and withdrawal of National Library service may result if they fail to provide this support.

As its services expanded the Solomon Islands National Library began to establish its own identity. A move was made from the temporary headquarters in the Honiara Public Library to more spacious but rather more primitive accommodation in the Government primary school. The bookstock remained in the Public Library putting a distance of over a mile between the stock and the staff. The card catalogue overflowed and shoe boxes came into operation. Urgent requests were sent to London for cabinets providing 200 drawers. Each ship brought a consignment of books and boxes to be unpacked which began to encroach on the limited working area. Researchers began to arrive, having heard of the Pacific Collection, and they acquired desks, chairs, and the endless cups of coffee we brewed. Typewriters worked overtime, books were packed, and sent out to libraries. Unchecked filing appeared to double daily and still new libraries joined the service and new supplies of books arrived. We had no air-conditioning and staff and stock were subjected to regular dust storms and invasions by a variety of tropical insect pests. Mental and physical energies were depleted while the endless heat and enervating humidity added to the daily endurance. We slaved with a dedication which was both vital and felt by all.

By February 1977 the Solomon Islands National Library had submitted to London book or-

ders worth £31,000. The planned extension services were all operating including subject loan collections and bulk book loans to member libraries. Request and interloan services were available although these services were not then being used very extensively. The National Library collection held 2,900 titles in the form of books, periodical articles and theses. In addition, custom stories and oral tradition had been recorded on over 300 cassette tapes. Library promotion was being exploited through the broadcasting service, the national newspaper, storyhours and school visits.

In February 1977 I left the Solomon Islands leaving behind a land I had grown to regard as home. Travelling in small six or nine seater planes, float planes, coastal steamers, canoes, and on foot, I had been to district centres, isolated educational establishments, and remote bush villages. I had spent days praying for sunset and the welcome slight drop in temperature, I had travelled up lagoons at sunrise with dolphins jumping as the canoe passed by. I had waded knee-deep in mud through tropical forest and walked in the heat of the sun for miles over baking hot sand, I had climbed to the crater of a volcano and drunk coconut milk when our water supply ran out, I had sat round banana leaves on the ground and eaten baked sweet potato, pork, and tapioca pudding, and I had learned to admire and like the Solomon Islanders and to respect their way of life. In fact, I still am not convinced that Western influence is necessary or even welcome in these islands. The powerful influences for good may well be outweighed by the harm they also achieve.